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# ON THE PSYCHOLOGY OF POETIC CONSTRUCTION

## AN EXPERIMENTAL METHOD

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What is the peculiar coloring of consciousness and what is the particular correlation of mental elements which characterize the processes of the poetic imagination? Precisely how can the poet's actual construction of a poem be described in psychological terms?

No positive answer to these questions is attempted in this paper. I shall at present endeavor only to outline tentatively an experimental method, an adequate application of which will, I believe, yield concrete information concerning the workings of the creative imagination during the process of poetic construction, and thus contribute to fill a gap in present psychological knowledge.

My first interest in the problem was stimulated by Professor Titchener, under whose direction the Cornell Psychological Seminary during the year 1907-1908 studied the problem of imagination. "Imagination is virgin territory, and awaits as it invites the pioneer:—" <sup>1</sup> and if this judgment of Titchener's represents fairly the status of the structural element, the image of imagination, it is doubly true of the higher complexes of the imaginative consciousness, especially of the processes of "inspiration" and poetic construction. I shall preface my outline of the proposed method by referring very briefly to several other methods used for the study of imagination, claiming no completeness of survey whatever and undertaking no criticism, but touching on their main points only in order to relate them to the method here proposed and so to indicate some positive merits (but also some scarcely avoidable disadvantages) which it seems to possess for the experimental study of the particular problem before us.

To a not inconsiderable part of educated humanity, this sort of inquiry has always appeared in the nature of poetic

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<sup>1</sup> E. B. Titchener, *The Past Decade in Experimental Psychology*; *American Journal of Psychology*, XXI, 1910, 417.

*l'èse majesté*. For, while poetic construction has never ceased to interest mankind, the marvelous character of the poet's output has seemed to demand a mystical explanation. Mediocre humanity, regarding its mediocrity as normal, has seen in the prodigality of poetic genius a mark of super-normality, and has accordingly treated the poet as a god-inspired man, a madman divine. Witness the phrases 'inspiration,' 'divine fire,' '*poeta nascitur*,' and the poet's own traditional appeal to the muses. Plato writes in the *Ion*, "God takes away the minds of poets, and uses them as his ministers;" and Shakespeare:

"The lunatic, the lover, and the poet  
Are of imagination all compact."

The bacchante is possessed by the deity; the poet is a priest of God; Handel sees Jehovah himself in writing the Halleluiah Chorus; Paganini's violin is devil-bewitched. This has been the popular explanation of the poet's work. Needless to say, on this basis we may be able to write poetry, but we can never explain the writing of it. Yet it must be confessed that even sober psychologists have often yielded to the lure of the mystical, and ended their chapter on imagination with a virtual confession of their inability to deal with it scientifically.

In the earlier psychology, of course, the imaginative faculty was discussed in a formal manner and was treated in a way calculated to fit it in the particular groove to which it was predestined by the logical demands of the philosopher's system: it was accordingly represented as thought involving internal intuition (Descartes), or as modification of sensation (Hume, Condillac), or else as the synthesis of reproduction operating in the dark chambers of the mind (Kant), and so forth.

The most cursory survey of the chapters on imagination in more recent psychological literature would reveal the absence of any agreement as to the nature of imagination, its relation to other mental processes, or its classification under some one general group of mental activity. Imagination is treated indifferently in connection with the representative, the affective, the volitional, or the higher thought-processes. James Mill styles it a mere train of ideas; Sully accentuates the choice of alternative combinations; James speaks of it as the recombination of previously experienced elements into new and original forms; Ladd stresses the teleological and lapses into mysticism; Calkins calls it the personal attitude

of a self; Wundt describes it as a perceptual form of intellectual elaboration; Höffding treats it as the power of concrete ideation; Ribot discovers affective, volitional, motor elements. One could write a paragraph composed wholly of citations from standard psychological treatises, which would describe imagination as being everything that a mental process can well be, and would find in it, as the essential factor, sensation, feeling, will, association, reproduction, recombination! This state of affairs characterizing the treatment of imagination is only emphasized when we reach the paragraphs touching on the poet's imagination. The chapter on poetic construction is yet to be written in modern psychology, and written it can be, of course, only on the basis of experimental study.

The process of poetic construction may be studied on the basis of an experimental study of imagery. Indeed the scientific study of imagination during the last hundred years has been very largely a discussion of mental imagery. Bonald, Egger, Taine, Ribot, Arréat, Dugas, Philippe, Binet, Paulhan, Peillaube, Souriau, Galton, Bain, Meumann, Wallaschek, and many more have studied the types of mental imagery, visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, verbal, after-images, memory images, images of imagination. A very promising investigation of this sort is represented by the Cheves West-Perky experiments, conducted at the Cornell laboratory, the publication of which<sup>2</sup> has attracted considerable attention. The West-Perky experiments, at which I had the opportunity of serving as an observer, were calculated to lay hold on the image of imagination and, by comparing it with the image of memory and with perception, to furnish experimental knowledge of the structural elements of the imaginative consciousness. This sort of study is decidedly more definite and more relevant to our problem than the conventional treatment of imagery in general; but, in applying its conclusions to the problem of creative imagination, care should be exercised lest an incautious interpretation prejudice at the very start the success of a study like ours. For, it seems to me, one is scarcely warranted in proceeding from an experimentally elaborated and grounded difference (or else lack of essential disparity) between the image of imagination and the image of memory or perception, to the declaration of a corresponding difference or similarity between the processes of creative imagination and memory or perception,

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<sup>2</sup> *Amer. Jour. of Psychol.*, XXI, 1910, 422-452.

as the case may be. Would imagination cease to be a distinctive mental process if experimentation disclosed in it no structural elements other than those present in memory and perception? It may be possible that the poetic imagination is a unique elaboration of a wealth of material not different in structure from the stuff of memory and perception. The prosaic memory and the poetic imagination may be using the same alphabet of images, yet speak quite different languages. The problem of the poetic imagination, accordingly, requires an experimental knowledge, not only of *what* materials it uses, but also of *how* it uses them; how the poet combines usual conscious material in a most unusual way,—how, in the words of Browning's *Abt Vogler*, "such gift be allowed to man, That out of three sounds, he frame not a fourth sound but a star." To make it significant for the experimental study of our problem, therefore, the laboratory investigations of the image of imagination should be supplemented by a study of the process of poetic construction itself in such a way as to preserve its dynamic essence.

This attitude toward our problem is, to be sure, by no means new, and I shall discuss briefly what seem to me to be the several typical avenues from which the study of poetic construction has been or might be approached. Thus, we may study the faint manifestations of what appears to be a poetic consciousness in mediocre minds. We may, for example, preface our study by attacking the problem from the angle of aesthetic appreciation: read a poem to a class of high school or college students and ask them to report the imaginative processes experienced. Then, passing beyond the mere enjoyment, we may ask a class of boys or girls or adults to write a poem, and then tell us how they did it. How far can experimenting of this sort carry us towards our desired goal: the solution of the problem of poetic construction? The verses, of course, will be doggerel; the introspections at their best will accordingly be introspections concerning the doggerel-writing process, not concerning the process of *poetic* construction. For we have no reason to suppose that the radical features distinguishing the output of a dunderhead from that of a Dante may not indicate a corresponding difference in the working of their imaginations. If we are to study the poetic consciousness directly, we must first of all find our poet:

"Wer den Dichter will verstehen  
Muss in Dichters Lande gehen."

We must go to the poet's own country; we must study him on his native soil, in his own element. But how?

As one reads over the literature on creative imagination, especially the more recent French contributions, one is impressed by what may be called its gossipy character. In book after book one reads entertaining bits about poets, painters, musicians:—the vagaries of Théophile Gautier and the De Goncourts, the whims of Baudelaire and Balzac, the eccentricities of Daudet, the passions and sufferings of Chopin and De Musset, the luxuriance of Flaubert and Massenet, the cynicism of De Maupassant, etc., etc. I would not in any way depreciate the great value of this sort of work. The more we know about poets, the nearer we get to understanding the poetic consciousness; but surely the genius of Gautier did not exhaust itself in wearing outlandish waistcoats, nor is the literary work of Carlyle explainable quite in terms of his over-indulgence in ginger-bread. How, then, is the psychologist of the poetic imagination to become something more than a compiler of literary anecdotes? Is he to spy upon the poet unawares, dog his footsteps, jotting down every word in an effort to discover the trick of his inspired craft? Or is he to deposit him in a laboratory, and direct him to write poetry to the accompaniment of a smoked-drum motor, with intervals between stanzas for introspection? Or is he to extract his secret with a questionnaire?

Important work of a preliminary character has been done and can be furthered in the form of collecting, digesting, and presenting in systematic form the utterances of great and lesser poets on the subject of their art; the self-revealing snatches of verse or prose passages in which the literary genius, Whitman-like, "celebrates himself;" or else the more elaborate attempts at creative introspection,—writings like Edgar Allan Poe's *Philosophy of Composition*, purporting to give the history of *The Raven*; the "Studies of My Own Creation" by the poet Otto Ludwig, which Richard Müller-Freienfels has recorded in his *Psychologie der Kunst*, and others. A carefully worded questionnaire sent to contemporary poets of unquestioned genius, asking them for introspections concerning their methods of creative work, would be likely to yield revelations most valuable to the student of the problem. Or, going still further experimentally, one could select a genuine poet and simply Bozwellize him, study his imaginative consciousness directly, and secure the best introspective reports possible. Such studies have been repeatedly made in France, notably Binet and Passy's accounts of French

dramatists, psychological reports of the literary work of Zola and Hervieu, and also Paulhan's record of the self-analysis of Roger Dumas, one of the younger French poets, containing an introspective history of the construction of two entire poems,—and most interesting reading it all makes too!

But all of these methods suffer from certain radical defects. Obviously we can not depend on a poet's self-revelational snatches of verse for the solution of our problem. One can borrow a couplet from Shakespeare or Shelley in order to illustrate vividly a conclusion already based on other grounds; but the psychology of imagination will not go far if it consists merely of poetical quotations. We can scarcely expect scientific exactness and accurate introspection from a poet who is expressing his inmost soul for other than laboratory purposes.

Far different is the case when the poet in a calm mood actually attempts to give an introspective account of his creative process. For that very type of mind which makes him a fine poet, makes him in most cases also a very bad psychological observer. Most of the poetic psychologizing along this line that I have read suffers from the irrepressible artistic temperament. The poet seems utterly unable to analyze himself with scientific objectivity. He sees things colored by his artistic preconceptions. He is either a mystic believer in the divine inspiration idea,—or else he is an Edgar Allan Poe type of a rationalist and tells you, step by step, just how he succeeded in deducing his great poem from his major premise. The student of imagination seeking light from the direct introspections of poets is thus obliged to steer his way between the Scylla of poetic mysticism and the Charybdis of irresponsible psychologizing. He is in the very palace of poetry, but the figures he meets all wear masks. Unless he can find his poet, he has little use for the introspections of mediocre minds; and, when he does find his poet, the latter turns out to be a most undependable psychological observer.

Laboratory experimenting with the actual process of poetic construction is confronted by radical difficulties, for the process is essentially spontaneous. Any conditions which interfere with the spontaneity of the creative imagination disturb the whole process. A poet can scarcely write genuine poetry and at the same time play laboratory observer. To be sure, a similar difficulty accompanies, in a measure, all psychological observing; but the very sense of partaking in an experiment, the very consciousness of having to report on

what is going on, may result, in the poet's case, in nothing poetic going on.

I should once more disclaim any inclination toward drastic criticism. Each of the methods just cited has, up to a certain point, justified its application by yielding genuine information on the subject. My point is that, even in combination, they are approximative only and do not touch the heart of the problem. Experimentation with the image of imagination leaves open the problem whether the creative imagination may not perhaps be essentially an unusual way of using usual conscious material. Studies of the imaginative consciousness of mediocre minds are not assuredly relevant to the problem, for the difference between the mental operations of the poet and of the verse-monger may be as radical as is the difference between their respective products. Anecdotal discussions of the poet's characteristics, whims, and mannerisms are liable to lead to conclusions more interesting than significant. The final solution of our problem demands an experimental study of the poet himself; yet the psychological value of the self-revelational utterances of poets is at least partially vitiated by the poet's apparently irrepressible tendency to go to one of two extremes, and either ignore introspective clearness and accuracy in his zest for rich poetic expression,—or else lapse into the sort of psychologizing of which the artistic temperament, lacking the sense of scientific responsibility, seems notoriously capable. And the spontaneity of the process of poetic construction seems jeopardized when we ask the poet to turn laboratory observer while actually creating.

Are we, then, to give up the attempt at experimental investigation and rest satisfied with the roundabout ways of studying the process, satisfied too with the surmises and conjectures that have up to the present time formed so large a part of the conclusions concerning the poetic imagination? While thus seeking a promising avenue of experimental approach to the heart of my problem, I happened some years ago to be reading a volume of the Russian poet Lermontov. It contained two facsimile reproductions from the poet's manuscripts. One was a clean-copied page, and I took some pleasure in studying Lermontov's handwriting and reading his lines. The other facsimile was a first draft, very different in appearance from the clean copy: scratched up, scored and interlined, corrected to the point of illegibility. It was while doing my best to decipher Lermontov's script that the idea occurred to me, which I have since endeavored to develop



and work out into a method for the experimental study of poetic construction.

Is not the problem of poetic construction a problem as to what goes on in the poet's consciousness while he is actually constructing? If some one had asked Lermontov how he wrote the poem in question, perhaps his answer would have been a wave of the hand, or a fanciful bit of irresponsible psychologizing. Yet this marked up copy in which word supplanted word, phrase phrase, and whole lines and stanzas were scratched up and crossed out to make room for their successors: is not this scarcely legible page a virtual laboratory record? If one could trace and establish the actual order in which pen-stroke followed pen-stroke, would not one be in a position essentially similar to that of the experimenter who reads on the smoked drum the zigzaggy record of his observer's reactions? Here are several false beginnings of a stanza, all suggesting different ideational and emotional contexts: the record of the progress from one to the other would be a record of the actual course of the poet's constructive process. Does the poet proceed with a clear view of his goal, and is his work one of selection from a rich store-house of image-combinations, as the typical British psychologists are inclined to believe? Or is the poet's work rather a progress from a vaguely felt mood to a mood more and more clearly experienced, a progress which is for the poet a voyage of discovery in which he really finds out what he is trying to say? Does the poem grow out of a catchy line or a jingle and is built around it; or is the pregnant phrase itself the child, the phraseologic elaboration of a central idea? Or, in case all of these processes are involved in the writing of genuine poetry, what mental factors are brought into play to emphasize one or another of these processes? All these questions, so puzzling at the present time and so likely to lead to mere theorizing, may find an adequate answer in the study of the experimental record represented by the poet's first draft. A poem's first draft is an objective record of a spontaneous process. In it the poet has, as it were, introspected while creating; step by step, the progress from mood to mood or from word to word or from image-combination to image-combination has found its inscribed record. Even the vicious scratches, the impatient or angry jabs with the pen, the idle lettering or sketching on the margin, the occasional smooth-running stanzas,—all indicate the progressive ideational-emotional coloring of the poet's consciousness. The

correct interpretation of the first draft of a poem would thus be as correct an answer as it is experimentally possible to give to the question: what went on in the poet's imaginative consciousness while he was writing this poem?

The claim contained in the last sentence sounds bold, and yet it will be found modest enough. For this method has undeniable disadvantages. To begin with, first drafts of genuine poetry are not to be found as easily as I for one was sanguine enough to suppose at first. Poets have a curious reluctance to preserve these dirty-looking scraps of paper. A poem is written; it must be copied in its finished perfection, and then the luckless record of its natal hour is usually thrown into the fire or is torn to bits. Browning, for example, always destroyed his first drafts. It is only by chance that the illegible scraps of paper are saved. Still, long and patient search, especially in large libraries, will be sure to bring to light a sufficiently large number of the desired records, although it must be added that a poet's first drafts are likely to become the property of private collectors and are thus hard to trace. One such collector, however, has been good enough to print Shelley's Note Books, in three volumes, containing a good deal of valuable material.

In the second place, the almost illegible material must be deciphered, transcribed, and interpreted in the light of what is known of the character of the poet in question, his general mode of work, the uniformity or otherwise of his handwriting, etc. Literary erudition and psychological interpretation must thus go hand in hand in this sort of work.

Yet, even after this part of the work has been done successfully, the experimental conclusions reached will be valid only for the poem in question. Shelley's method of writing the *Lament* may be altogether different from Swinburne's or Byron's methods, different also from Shelley's own method in writing the *Ode to the West Wind*. Accordingly it will be necessary to decipher, study, and interpret as large a body of such materials as is possible. But such work will not be without its compensations, as it may throw light on neighboring fields of inquiry. Should a study of two poets disclose differences in their methods of construction corresponding to the differences in the character of their poetic productions, an experimental basis would be found for a good deal in aesthetics which at present rests only on theory. Of necessity, an investigation of this sort will have to be based on modern poetry alone, there being none of Virgil's or Dante's scratched up pages in existence. But that in

itself will be no objection, if only a wide enough selection of first drafts from the great modern poets be available. If several genuine contemporary poets could somehow be induced to preserve their first drafts, without being aware that they are providing psychological material, much valuable information could be secured. Every successive interpretation will contribute to check up the experimental conclusions already reached and to establish them more firmly.

Even when all this is done, however, still one objection remains: what of the very most initial beginning of the poetic process: the so-called divine afflatus, the first breath of inspiration? That, I admit, cannot be reached by this method. This method is available from the first stroke of the pen: from that stroke on it is strictly experimental. But have we any reason whatever for believing that the continuity of the poet's creative process experiences a radical break precisely at the point when it begins to express itself on paper?

The limited time I have been able to devote to this problem has been spent largely in collecting, deciphering, and interpreting a few of the coveted first drafts. I have sedulously endeavored to avoid all speculation until an adequate supply of objectively established data could justify my proceeding to theorize. At present my supply is still meagre, but, while it does not warrant me in advancing any positive conclusions, it has abundantly vindicated my initial faith in this method as a means of studying, in genuine experimental fashion, the actual process of poetic construction. The present stage of my work gives me reason to hope that before very long I should be able to indicate, at least in broad outlines, the nature of the conclusions to which my inquiry has led me.

But I am becoming increasingly convinced that any generalizations reached by means of this method will be the more reliable the wider the field of poetic material which serves as their basis. This consideration has led me to overcome the natural reluctance of reporting on uncompleted work. My excuse for presenting this rough outline of efforts as yet unrewarded by positive results is that it may, perhaps, lead others, whose environment affords better opportunities for photographing or copying significant first drafts of genuine poetry, to interpret such poetic records with an aim similar to mine; and that, on the basis of several independent investigations of this sort, valid conclusions may be attained concerning the psychological description of the process of poetic construction.